

**“Africa in Focus”**  
**By**  
**Ambassador D. Bruce Wharton (Ret.)**  
**September 25, 2018**

In analyzing and describing Sub-Saharan Africa for the audience, Amb. Wharton discussed historical background, the current setting, and what the U.S. should do to capitalize on opportunities there.

Before colonization by the Europeans, he said that Africa was not a primitive, undeveloped, isolated region. It was home to functioning empires and kingdoms, artistic sophistication, and monumental architecture. In the 1500s Africa already hosted trading posts with the Middle East.

Geopolitical competition in Europe was offshored to Africa, with the continent being carved up into colonial spheres at the Berlin Conference of 1884. Colonial rule inflicted certain atrocities, particularly in the Belgian Congo. This led to public and religious backlash in the West, which coincided with early calls by African leaders for national self-determination. The Atlantic Charter of 1941 codified great-power support for independent African countries (who would presumably vote in a helpful manner in international organizations).

Amb. Wharton conceded that there are plenty of bad stories coming out of Africa – political corruption and economic mismanagement, environmental despoilment (drought, desertification, water scarcity) -- all coming together to produce *ungoverned spaces* home to extremist groups such as Boko Haram. Nonetheless, he judged there to be more positive stories than negative.

On the positive side:

- Since 2000, the number of war deaths from conflict on the continent has been falling.
- By 2050 Africa’s population will grow from 1.2 billion to 2 billion, and its middle class will grow concomitantly.
  - Job creation will be the key to turning these additional people into a demographic dividend.
- African GDP has been growing twice as fast as global GDP.
- Public health has improved -- e.g. AIDS is no longer a death sentence, malaria is being brought under control, and infant mortality rates are falling.

Hopes have been raised in the past, not to be realized. Why should this time be different? Amb. Wharton said that the difference is the diffusion of communication technologies. Technologies such as cell phones and the internet are compensating for other infrastructural weaknesses, and fostering new commercial and entrepreneurial opportunities.

Despite this upside, why should the United States care?

- First, 13% of the U.S. population can trace its roots back to Africa.
- Second, practical engagement with Africa can enhance our national security, commercial outlets, and the tackling of transnational problems such as climate change.
- Third, nations such as China, India, Brazil and Turkey are already gaining influence there.

So, what should the United States do to fruitfully partner with African countries?

- First, it should increase support for U.S. businesses seeking to operate there.
  - In particular pass the BUILD Act of 2018 (for international development financing). Also expand the work of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) and the Millennium Challenge Corporation.
- Second, continue humanitarian aid.
  - For example, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which is thought to have saved 11 million lives.
- Third, support institution building, especially for capable and professional military-security and police forces.
- Fourth, invest in young Africans, such as through language training and educational exchanges.
  - Young Africans' dashed aspirations would abet migration, crime, and conflict.

In sum, Amb. Wharton said that Africa is at a tipping point, poised to move forward; and that the United States can play a positive role in helping this to happen.

**Paul F. Herman, Jr.**